

Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Houston, Texas
Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic • Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic, Lufkin • Galveston VA Outpatient Clinic • Texas City VA Outpatient Clinic

Lufkin VA Clinic Renamed in Honor of Former Congressman Charles Wilson

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center (MEDVAMC)'s VA Outpatient Clinic in Lufkin, Texas has officially been renamed under Public Law 108-422 (S. 424), November 30, 2004 in honor of former U.S. Representative Charles Wilson. A renaming ceremony for the facility is planned for the spring of 2005.

Wilson, born in Trinity, Texas, received a bachelor's degree from the United States Naval Academy in 1956 and served in the United States Navy, with the rank of lieutenant from 1956 to 1960. He was elected to the Texas House of Representatives in 1960 and then elected to the Texas Senate in 1966. In 1973, Wilson was elected to the 93rd United States Congress and served as a U.S. Representative until 1997.

Opened in 1991, the Charles Wilson VA Outpatient Clinic in Lufkin provides primary care, laboratory, radiology, and mental health services to veterans in the area. In fiscal year 2004, there were 45,155 outpatient visits to the clinic, dramatically up from the 18,441 visits in the year 2000.

In January 2005, officials at the MEDVAMC began the contracting process for a facility to replace the current Lufkin facility located at 1301 W. Frank Avenue. The MEDVAMC is looking to acquire a no-cost, transferable purchase option for a site in Lufkin upon which a new, larger clinic can be constructed. The VA will also consider acceptance of a donated site. The property must be available for use and owner must be willing to give VA an option for a sufficient time frame to allow VA to solicit interested developers and award a lease contract.

Interested developers should contact the Department of Veterans Affairs Real Property Service at (202) 565-9131 or fax (202) 565-5424. ♦

Galveston VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic will officially open for patient care on March 7, 2005. Another VA Clinic will open on April 4, 2005 in Texas City . . .

Outpatient Clinics Open in Galveston

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center (MEDVAMC) will hold a Ribbon Cutting Ceremony on Friday, March 4, 2005 at 10 a.m. celebrating the opening of its new Community Based Outpatient Clinic (CBOC) in Galveston, Texas. The new clinic is conveniently located at 6115 Avenue L (Corner of 61st and L), Galveston, Texas 77551

Officially opening for patient care on Monday, March 7, 2005, the Galveston CBOC will provide primary care and mental health services for veterans in the area and is expected to see about 4,000 patients the first year of operation. The new Galveston CBOC will greatly expand the VA's capacity for outpatient care in southeast Texas.

The MEDVAMC is contacting veterans currently enrolled at the medical center in Houston and living in the Galveston area, to determine if they wish to receive primary health care services at the new Galveston CBOC.

Veterans may choose to stay with their current MEDVAMC health care provider or have the VA transfer their

(continued on page 3)



Ray Lanier, M.D., president and chief operating officer of American Medical Services (right) gives a tour of the new Galveston Community Based Outpatient Clinic to Adam Walms, M.H.A., M.A., MEDVAMC associate director (left) and Robert T. Dambach, Galveston County Veteran Service Officer a week before the facility's ribbon cutting ceremony. Officially opening for patient care on Monday, March 7, 2005, the Galveston CBOC will provide primary care and mental health services for veterans in the area and is expected to see about 4,000 patients the first year of operation. The MEDVAMC is contacting veterans currently enrolled at the medical center in Houston and living in the Galveston area, to determine if they wish to receive primary health care services at the new Galveston CBOC.

Houston Recognized as Only VA with Consistently Low Mortality Rates 5 Years in a Row

HOUSTON - On February 16, 2005, the Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center (MEDVAMC) received special recognition from the National Veterans Affairs Surgical Quality Improvement Program (NSQIP) Executive Committee for demonstrating consistently low observed-to-expected mortality rates in general surgery, all surgery, and all non-cardiac surgery five years in a row. The MEDVAMC is the only VA facility to receive this commendation.

"The entire surgical team, including surgeons, anesthesiologists, nurses, and our support staff, should be proud of their hard work in providing consistent, outstanding care to our veterans," said David H. Berger, M.D., MEDVAMC Operative Care Line executive.

The Committee, which met in January 2005, reviewed the accrual, workload, and outcome information on major surgery procedures performed at the MEDVAMC in fiscal years 2000 through 2004. The intent of the NSQIP is to provide reliable, valid data about comparative risk-adjusted outcomes of

major surgery in the VA and to provide reliable data about workload and length of stay. The ultimate use of these data is to improve the quality of surgical care to all veterans.

Annually, the NSQIP Executive Committee carefully reviews the risk-adjusted observed/expected (O/E) mortality ratios in each VA hospital for all surgical operations combined and each surgical subspecialty. An O/E ratio statistically significantly above one indicates that mortality is higher than what would be expected on the basis of the patient characteristics. An O/E ratio statistically significantly below one indicates that mortality is lower than what would be expected on the basis of the patient characteristics.

NSQIP is the first national, validated, outcome-based, risk-adjusted, and peer-controlled program for the measurement and enhancement of the quality of surgical care. Currently, the NSQIP incorporates 128 VAMCs and 14 sites from the private sector.

(continued on page 8)

Inside This Edition

Emergency Care at Non-VA Facilities	2
Word from the Director "Medical Care for Returning Service Members"	2
High-Tech Robotic Processor Means Faster, More Accurate Results	3
Free Parkinson's Disease Fair	3
New Stomach Ulcer Diagnosis Tool at Houston VA	4
Support Group Listing	4
Warning Signs of Heart Disease ..	5
Houston VA Medical Lab Earns National Accreditation	5
Book Donations Welcomed	6
New Health Care Web site	6
Inpatient Room Upgrades Make Vets Feel at Home	6
Weight Loss Success Story	7
Frequently Asked Questions	8

- SPECIAL EVENT -
American Ex-POW
Day Ceremony
April 8, 2005, 10 a.m.
MEDVAMC Gym
(713) 794-7349

Will the VA Pay for Emergency Care at a Non-VA Facility?

HOUSTON - In 2001, the U.S. Congress provided VA with authorization (called the Mill Bill) to pay for emergency care in non-VA facilities for veterans enrolled in the VA health care system. The benefit will pay for emergency care rendered for nonservice-connected conditions for enrolled veterans who have no other source of payment for the care. However, VA will only pay to the point of medical stability. There are very strict guidelines concerning these types of claims. Veterans and their non-VA providers should be aware that these claims must be filed with the VA within 90 days from the last day of the emergent care.

How do I qualify?

This benefit is a safety net for

enrolled veterans who have no other means of paying a private facility emergency bill. If another health insurance provider pays all or part of a bill, VA cannot provide any reimbursement. Veterans who retired from the U.S. military are covered by Tricare insurance and cannot file a Mill Bill claim. To qualify, you must meet all of these criteria:

- ✓ You were provided care in a hospital emergency department or similar facility providing emergency care.
- ✓ You are enrolled in the VA Health Care System.
- ✓ You have been provided care by a VA health care provider within the last 24 months (excludes C & P, Agent Orange, Ionized Radiation and Persian Gulf exams).
- ✓ You are financially liable to the

provider of the emergency treatment for that treatment.

- ✓ You have no other form of health care insurance.
- ✓ You do not have coverage under Medicare, Medicaid, or a state program.
- ✓ You do not have coverage under any other VA programs.
- ✓ You have no other contractual or legal recourse against a third party (such as a Workman's Comp Claim or a Motor Vehicle Accident) that will pay all or part of the bill.
- ✓ VA or other Federal facilities were not feasibly available at time of the emergency.
- ✓ The care must have been rendered in a medical emergency of such nature that a prudent layperson would have reasonably expected that delay in seeking immediate medical attention would have been hazardous to life or health.

Should I cancel my current insurance to meet these requirements?

VA encourages you to keep all current health insurance coverage. If you cancel your current insurance, your spouse may not retain health insurance coverage and spouses of veterans generally do not qualify for VA health care. Cancellation of current insurance coverage could result in you being disqualified for reinstatement based upon any pre-existing illnesses.

If you are covered by Medicare Part B and you cancel it, it cannot be reinstated until January of the next year. If you are covered by a program or plan that would pay for the emergency care received, you would not qualify for this benefit.

What is the timeline to file?

Veterans have a responsibility to ensure that the VA Transfer Center is notified immediately upon any hospital admission. The MEDVAMC Transfer Center Coordinator can be reached during regular business hours at (713) 794-7109. If you are calling after hours, dial (713) 791-1414, ext. 3808 and ask to speak to the Medical Administrative Assistant on duty.

Claims must be filed with the nearest VA Medical facility where the services were rendered within 90 days of the discharge date of medical service; otherwise, the claim will be denied because it was not filed in a timely manner.

What type of emergency services will VA cover?

VA will reimburse health care providers for all medical services necessary to stabilize your condition up to the point you can be transferred to an approved VA health care facility or other federal facility.

What about pharmacy items?

The VA's authority for reimburse-

ment of pharmacy items to veterans from non-VA providers follows a strict set of guidelines. The veteran must be actively enrolled in a Fee Basis Program; the pharmacy item must be considered as urgent or emergent by the initiating physician; the pharmacy item cannot be reimbursed past a ten day supply; and the prescription and receipts must be turned in to the Fee Basis Unit. The reimbursement is based upon the U.S. Government's Red Book cost and no taxes can be reimbursed.

Do I need to get approval before going to the emergency room?

No. If you are an eligible veteran, and a VA facility is not feasibly available when you believe your health or life is in immediate danger, report directly to the closest emergency room.

If hospitalization is required, you, your representative, or the treating facility should contact the nearest VA within 24 hours to arrange a transfer to VA care by calling the VA Transfer Center at (713) 794-7109.

How long will I stay in the private hospital?

If you are hospitalized, and the VA is notified, the VA will be in regular contact with your physician at the private hospital. As soon as your condition stabilizes, the VA will assist the private facility with arrangements to transport you to a VA, or VA-designated facility.

What if I do not wish to leave the private facility?

VA will pay for your emergency care services only until your condition is stabilized. If you stay beyond that, you will assume full responsibility for the payment of costs associated with treatment.

Will I have to pay for my ambulance bill to the non-VA facility?

If the VA accepts responsibility for the emergency room visit and/or admission, the ambulance will be paid from the scene of the incident to the first non-VA facility providing necessary care.

Will I have to pay for an ambulance from the non-VA facility to a VA facility?

Yes. The VA is only authorized to pay for an ambulance to go from the scene of the incident to the first non-VA facility providing necessary care. Ambulance bills are considered unauthorized claims, and must be submitted to the VA in a timely manner.

Who do I call for more information?

For information about emergency care in non-VA facilities, please call the MEDVAMC Fee Basis Mill Bill office at (713) 791-1414, ext. 3883 or the Fee Basis Office at (713) 794-7282. ♦

A Word from the Director . . .

Care for Returning Service Members

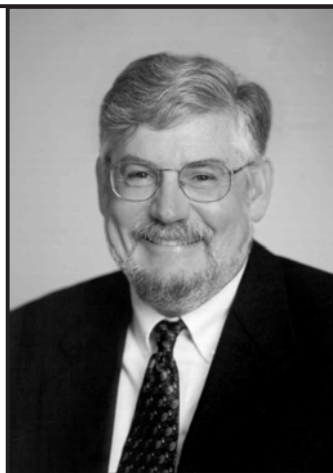
HOUSTON - Last August, U.S. Marine 1st Lt. David Lewis was wounded in Iraq by a rocket-propelled grenade. With shrapnel lodged in both eyes, David was essentially blind. He was transferred to Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany for immediate care, and then to the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland.

To obtain specialized care, David chose to come here, to the Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center (MEDVAMC). On his arrival, he was examined by Mathew Benz, M.D., MEDVAMC surgical retina specialist and Silvia Orengo, M.D., MEDVAMC Eye Care Line executive. Dr. Benz determined that surgery should be performed immediately and approximately six hours later, he operated on David's right eye. A week later, David had surgery on his left eye. Mitchell Weikert, M.D., MEDVAMC anterior segment specialist also performed a cataract extraction during this procedure.

Both surgeries were successful and David now has 20/70 vision in his right eye, better than predicted. He underwent an additional surgery in January on his left eye. David has a long road of recovery ahead of him, but there is a good chance he may regain close to normal vision in both eyes.

Why am I telling you David's story? Because the MEDVAMC is working closely with the Department of Defense to meet the needs of our newest veterans – the men and women who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom – by creating a seamless transition from active duty to civilian life.

Our goal at the MEDVAMC is to ensure that every seriously injured or ill serviceman and woman returning from combat receive priority consideration and world-class service. We are working to find ways to move records more



Edgar L. Tucker, Medical Center Director

efficiently; share critical medical information electronically; process benefit claims as one shared system; and, in every way possible, hold open the doors to an uncomplicated passage from soldier to citizen.

Every active-duty service member, Reservist, or National Guard member who serves in a theater of combat operations is eligible for hospital care, medical services, and nursing home care for injuries or illnesses he or she believes is related to combat service for a period up to two years beginning on the date of discharge or release from service. This two-year eligibility for medical care is available even if there is insufficient medical evidence available to conclude that the veteran's illness is the result of combat service. At the end of the two-year period, these veterans have the same eligibility for VA medical care as veterans of earlier conflicts.

The MEDVAMC continues in its pursuit of the highest quality of health care of all of our veterans. If you are a recently discharged service member or the family member of one, and need information or assistance, call our Patient Access Center Manager Fern Taylor today at (713) 794-7034. Additional veteran health benefit information is also available at www.va.gov. ♦

High-Tech Robotic Laboratory Processor at Houston VA Means Faster and More Accurate Test Results for Veterans

HOUSTON - The state-of-the-art robotic processor system inside the laboratory at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) has drastically cut the time health care professionals wait for results of crucial medical tests. The MEDVAMC is the only facility in Houston to offer this important diagnostic technology to its patients.

"Our physicians are receiving test results 30 to 45 minutes faster with this new robotic processor. This cutting edge, state-of-the-art laboratory technology has definitely enhanced the quality of patient care here at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center," said Valerie Coleman, MT (ASCP), CHS (ABHI), MEDVAMC laboratory manager.

The robotic processor runs up to 600 tests per hour and includes such safety and quality-control features as cap piercing, 'flags' when irregularities appear or results are outside normal ranges, automatic creation of slides when abnormalities are detected, and automatic clot detection.

"Our technicians can now focus on

the exceptions, rather than the normal specimens. This unquestionably sets new standards in efficiency and test reliability," said Coleman.

No longer do MEDVAMC phlebotomists sort samples by type of tests; they simply place by size into sectors and racks. The bar-coded samples are read by the processor and sorted by type of test. As a patient safety feature, the samples are read numerous times throughout the process. This automated machinery has eliminated the time-consuming manual steps in the traditional testing process and has saved countless man-hours.

Upon completion of the physician-requested testing on a specimen, it is electronically assigned a number by the processor and stored in an area called the stockyard for a specific time period. In the stockyard, a specimen can easily be retrieved and rerun for additional testing if needed.

"Doing away with the hands-on processes also reduces the risk of contamination and exposure for our staff members. This automated



No longer do MEDVAMC phlebotomists sort samples by type of tests; they simply place by size into sectors and racks. The bar-coded samples are read by the processor and sorted by type of test. Above, Ramiro Garza, supervisory medical technologist, MEDVAMC Laboratory Section, sorts samples into the robotic processor racks. The robotic processor runs up to 600 tests per hour and includes such safety and quality-control features as cap piercing, 'flags' when irregularities appear or results are outside normal ranges, automatic creation of slides when abnormalities are detected, and automatic clot detection.

technology has enabled the MEDVAMC to enhance its entire testing process, from sample draw to final results," said Coleman.

This full service robotic processor is easy to use and can be expanded with

additional software in order to provide more complex processing and keep MEDVAMC health care providers equipped with the latest diagnostic tools.

♦ Fran Burke, MEDVAMC Public Affairs Specialist

The Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center Parkinson's Disease Research, Education & Clinical Center presents:

"Free Parkinson's Disease Wellness Education Fair"

WHEN: Saturday, April 30, 2005, 9 a.m. - 1 p.m.

WHERE: American Red Cross Building, 2700 Southwest Freeway, Kirby Drive & Hwy 59
Parking is free with easy access to the building.

WHAT: In recognition of Parkinson's Disease Awareness Month, the MEDVAMC PADRECC and Houston Area Parkinson's Society (HAPS) are sponsoring a free Wellness Education Fair for individuals with Parkinson's disease (PD) and their families

CONTACT: For more information, please call Naomi Nelson, Ph.D., R.N. at (713) 794-8938.

INFO: This is a "Come" and "Go" event with light refreshments. Booth activities and small group presentations include:

- ✓ Health, wellness, and balance screenings.
- ✓ Exercise education class.
- ✓ Hand strength testing and strategies for managing fatigue.
- ✓ Information about the Lee Silverman Voice Technique for PD.
- ✓ Blood pressure screening and information about diet, nutrition, and safety.
- ✓ Opportunities to "Ask the Neurologist" about the management of PD.

Co-sponsors include the Society for Progressive Supranuclear Palsy, Texas Woman's University School of Physical Therapy, Houston, and The University of Texas Medical Branch Department of Physical Therapy, Galveston. Join the PADRECC and HAPS teams, MEDVAMC personnel, and community health professionals in learning more about PD.

The National Parkinson Foundation, Inc. estimates that up to 1.5 million Americans have Parkinson's disease and that approximately 50,000 new cases are diagnosed each year. VA medical centers treat at least 20,000 Parkinson's disease patients every year.



Two New VA Clinics in Galveston County Open for Patient Care

(continued from page 1)

primary health care to the new Galveston CBOC. Veterans requiring specialized care will continue to receive this type of medical attention at the medical center in Houston.

In addition, another new CBOC, to be located at 9300 Emmett F. Lowry Expressway next to the Mainland Mall Shopping Center in Texas City, is scheduled to open in April 2005.

Veterans who wish to enroll in either the Galveston CBOC or the Texas City CBOC may call toll free 1-800-310-5001.

If you have a question or concern that cannot wait until your next appointment, please call the VA Network Telecare Center toll-free at 1(800) 639-5137. Health care providers are available to assist you 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

If you have a life-threatening emergency, immediately call 911 for assistance. ♦

Surprising Key to Reducing Risk of Disease

HOUSTON - If there was a new miracle product that could decrease your chances of heart disease, keep your diabetes under control, and even prevent cancer, would you rush out and buy it? Well, it's no miracle and it's available right now. This amazing product is fiber. That's right - found in fruit, beans, and your daily bowl of oatmeal.

Research has found that fiber actually has the ability to decrease the risk of several diseases in the body. Obesity, heart disease, constipation, and high cholesterol are just a few.

Fiber comes in two forms, soluble and insoluble. Examples of soluble fiber include oatmeal, oat bran, nuts, dried peas, beans, lentils, apples, seeds, pears, strawberries, and blueberries. Soluble fiber forms a gel in the body when it comes in contact with water. When this occurs, the food takes longer to be digested. This helps keep your blood glucose levels within normal range, as well as making you feel full. Soluble fiber also helps to keep your cholesterol within normal limits.

Insoluble fiber is the second type of fiber. Examples of insoluble fiber include whole wheat breads, barley, brown rice, whole grain breakfast cereals, carrots, cucumbers, zucchini, celery, and tomatoes. This type of fiber is also known as the 'Mop and Sponge.' Its job in the body is to bulk up the stool. It also picks up cancer causing cells and extra cholesterol in the body. Just like a mop, insoluble fiber cleans up unwanted things in the body.

Having both forms of fiber in the diet is very important because each has a different job. On average, healthy adults should consume 20 to 35 grams of dietary fiber each day.

Fiber comes from plants, so naturally foods like fruits and vegetables are very high in fiber. Here are some tips to increase fiber in your diet:

- ✓ Eat whole fruits instead of drinking fruit juices.
- ✓ Replace white rice, bread, and pasta with brown rice and whole-grain products.
- ✓ Choose whole grain breakfast cereals and try to find cereals that have five grams of fiber or more per serving.
- ✓ Snack on raw vegetables instead of chips or crackers.
- ✓ Add legumes or beans to your soups or salads.

For more information on fiber and a balanced diet, talk to your primary health care provider at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. ♦ *Kristen Love, MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern*

Unique method to diagnose the cause of abdominal discomfort, indigestion, and ulcers . . .

Veterans at Houston VA 'Breathe in a Bag' for Diagnosis of Stomach Ulcers

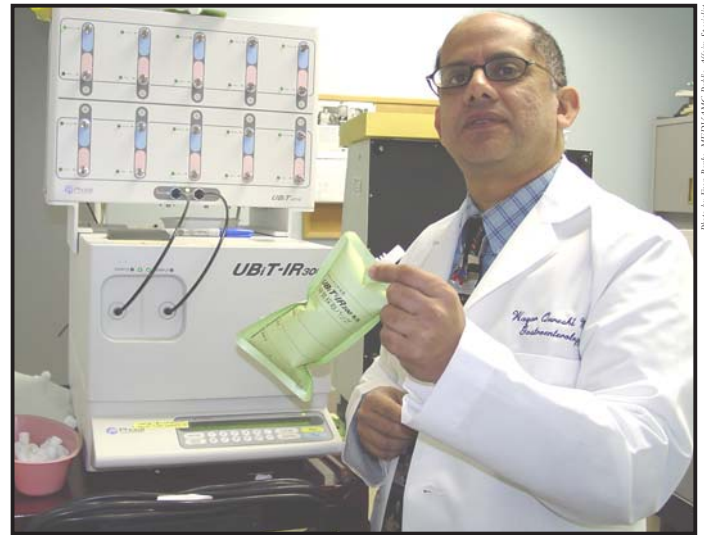
HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center (MEDVAMC) uses a breath test as one method to diagnose the cause of upper abdominal discomfort, indigestion, peptic ulcers, and gastric cancer and provide appropriate treatment. Researchers have only recently begun to understand the many, often complex diseases that affect the digestive system.

The breath test diagnostic method used at the MEDVAMC begins when a patient drinks a non-radioactive carbon drink and then breathes into a special plastic bag. The bag is then connected to a diagnostic machine to analyze the presence of a bacterium called *H. pylori*.

Found in the lining of the stomach, *H. pylori* is a common infection and has been found to be the number one cause of peptic ulcer disease, as well as a recognized cause of gastric cancer. About 20 percent of people under 40 years old and half of those over 60 years have *H. pylori* infection.

H. pylori infection is treatable with antibiotics. Elimination of this bacteria leads to a permanent cure for peptic ulcer disease.

At the MEDVAMC, the breath test technology is an easy, painless method of testing for *H. pylori* bacteria. "This is a very sensitive and reliable test with results in approximately six minutes. Over the last two decades, MEDVAMC has been a prominent center for *H. pylori* research worldwide," said Waqar A. Qureshi, M.D., MEDVAMC chief of



*At the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, the breath test technology is an easy, painless method of testing for *H. pylori* bacteria. "This is a very sensitive and reliable test with results in approximately six minutes," said Waqar A. Qureshi, M.D., MEDVAMC chief of endoscopy, Digestive Disease Section.*

endoscopy, Digestive Disease Section.

Prior to the discovery of this bacteria, spicy foods, stress, and lifestyle were considered to be major causes of ulcers. Spicy food and stress may aggravate ulcer symptoms in some people, but they do not cause ulcers. It is now known that these recurring ulcers are an infectious disease and are treated as an infection of the stomach.

"Veterans at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and across the nation continue to benefit from our scientific advances in medicine and the new, cutting-edge technology available here," said Qureshi, who is also an assistant professor of Medicine and Chief of Endoscopy at Baylor College of Medicine. ♦ *Fran Burke, Public Affairs Specialist*

We are Here to Help . . .

MS Self-Help Group

Meets 2nd Wednesday of every month, 2 - 3:30 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 2A Dining Room. Group facilitators: Lisa Whipple, (713) 794-7951 and Fe Runtanilla, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4559

Cancer Support Group

Meets 1st Tuesday of every month, 1-2 p.m., Nursing Unit (NU) 4D Dayroom. Group facilitators: Maria Lozano-Vasquez, (713) 791-1414, ext. 5273 and Chaplain Douglas Ensminger, (713) 794-7200

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

Meets every Wednesday, 7 p.m., Room 6C-105. Group facilitator: Billy M. (Bo) Cook, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6987

Better Breather's Club

Meets last Wednesday of every month, 1:30 p.m., Room 3C-371, Home Oxygen Clinic. Group facilitator: Paula Denman, (713) 794-8979

Pain Management for Opioid Medication Maintenance

Meets every Tuesday, 1 p.m., Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Pain Support Group

Meets every Wednesday, 1 p.m., Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Pain Education Group

Meets every Wednesday, 2 p.m., Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Pain Management for Women

Meets every Friday, 1 p.m., Room 5B-224. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Pain Management Pre-Pain Screening Group

Meets every Thursday, 9 a.m. and 1 p.m., Room 5C-215. Group facilitator: Gabriel Tan, (713) 794-8794

Lufkin Hypertension Classes

Meets 1st Thursday of every month, 2 p.m. Ask your nurse or your primary care provider, or stop by the front desk at the Lufkin Outpatient Clinic to register.

HIV Support/Educational Group

Meets every Tuesday, 2 p.m., Clinic 4, Room 1A-442. Group facilitator: Kathy Molitor, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6177 and Belinda Rainer, ext. 5292

Prostate Cancer Support Group

Meets 3rd Thursday of every month, 2 p.m., Room 4C-122. Group facilitators: Lillie Sonnier, (713) 791-1414, ext. 5919 and Tonjala Seals, (713) 791-1414, ext. 6227

Stroke Support Group

Meets 2nd and 4th Thursday of every month, 3 p.m., NU 2A Dining Room. Group facilitators: Laura Lawhon and Tommie Gonzalez, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4241/5254

Renal Support Group

Meets 1st Tuesday of every month, 9 a.m., Dental Conference Room 2A-312. Group facilitator: Juanita Ibarra, (713) 791-1414, ext. 4834

Parkinson's Disease Education/Support Group

Call for dates and times. Group facilitators: Naomi Nelson, (713) 794-8938 and Lisa Whipple, (713) 794-7951

Hepatitis C Support Group

Meets 1st Friday of every month, 1:30 p.m., Primecare Clinic 4 (NASA), Room 1A-442. Group facilitators: Lauri Burke, (713) 791-1414, ext. 3613 and Michelle Ray, (713) 791-1414, ext. 3394

High blood pressure, known as the silent killer, and diabetes are common heart disease risk factors . . .

Do You Know the Warning Signs of Heart Disease?

HOUSTON - The number-one killer of Americans is heart disease, which affects more than a quarter of the adult population in the United States. The Department of Veterans Affairs continues to pursue research aimed at learning more about heart disease and developing new treatments.

In 2003, VA received more than \$55 million in outside funding to conduct 879 studies relating to heart disease. VA also contributed nearly \$26.6 million for VA investigators to conduct an additional 150 research projects. Current studies and clinical trials are underway to improve coronary artery bypass surgery, understand how the heart rebuilds after a heart attack, and learn if certain vitamins play a role in reducing the chances of developing heart disease.

While VA research efforts are on the cutting edge, simply assuring that patients receive the appropriate current therapies can save thousands of lives each year. Last year, VA launched "Time is Life," a massive patient education campaign to stress the need for patients to seek medical care immediately if they experience symptoms of a heart attack.

Cardiovascular disease consists of angina, acute heart attack, congestive heart failure, high blood pressure, stroke, and congenital heart defects. High blood pressure, known as the silent killer, and diabetes are common heart disease risk factors. Unfortunately, many people tend to ignore body signals that indicate something is wrong. The following warning signs may indicate a heart attack:

- ✓ Pain, pressure, or discomfort in the chest
- ✓ Discomfort in the arm, shoulders, neck, or lower jaw
- ✓ Difficulty breathing
- ✓ Rapid heartbeat
- ✓ Light headedness or fainting
- ✓ Weakness



Listed as one of the best doctors in the nation in the field of cardiovascular disease, Blas A. Carabello, M.D. is the Medical Care Line executive at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. Above, Dr. Carabello performs a coronary angiogram to examine the blood vessels of a veteran. Dr. Carabello is also the Moncrief Professor of Medicine and Vice Chairman in the Department of Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine.

Do not ignore warning signs because "time is life." If you have medical question or problem and wish to talk with a professionally trained, registered nurse, call the VA Network Telecare Center at (713) 794-8985 or toll-free 1 (800) 639-5137. Registered nurses, pharmacists, and administrative clerks are ready to help answer health care questions 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you have a life-threatening medical condition, immediately call 911.

As with any disease, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Factors that can contribute to heart disease include smoking, poor diet and lack of exercise.

The following tips can help reduce the chances of developing heart disease:

- ✓ Get active - Exercise for 30 minutes every day.
- ✓ Limit eating salty and fatty foods.
- ✓ Eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables.
- ✓ Improve cholesterol levels.
- ✓ Avoid tobacco products - Smokers have more than twice the risk for heart attack as nonsmokers and are much more likely to die if they suffer a heart attack.
- ✓ Manage stress.
- ✓ Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.
- ✓ Control blood pressure.

Visit www.vaprevention.com for more information on heart disease. ♦

Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center congratulated for the excellence of the services being provided . . .

Medical Laboratory Earns Accreditation from College of American Pathologists

HOUSTON - The medical laboratory at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) has been awarded re-accreditation by the Commission on Laboratory Accreditation of the College of American Pathologists (CAP), based on the results of a recent on-site inspection.

Edgar L. Tucker, MEDVAMC director was advised of the national recognition and congratulated for the "excellence of the services being provided." The MEDVAMC Laboratory is one of the more than 6,000 CAP-accredited laboratories nationwide.

"Michael E. DeBakey VAMC Pathology & Laboratory Medicine is one of a select group of laboratories that has been evaluated and found to be in compliance with the CAP accreditation standards - rigorous laboratory

standards designed to help ensure quality patient care. The CAP's program is the most respected and recognized laboratory accreditation program in the world and has long been considered the "gold standard" against which others are measured," said Ronald B. Lepoff, M.D., Commission on Laboratory Accreditation chair in his notification letter.

The CAP Laboratory Accreditation Program, begun in the early 1960s, is recognized by the federal government as being equal to or more stringent than the government's own inspection program. Inspectors examine the records and quality control of the laboratory for the preceding two years, as well as the education and qualifications of the total staff, the adequacy of the facilities, the equipment, laboratory safety, and laboratory management to

determine how well the laboratory is serving the patient.

"I am very proud of the job that the laboratory staff does here at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. Our personnel are very dedicated and we take seriously the job of serving those who have served our country," said Valerie H. Coleman, M.T. (A.S.C.P.), C.H.S. (A.B.H.I.), MEDVAMC laboratory manager.

The College of American Pathologists is a medical society serving nearly 16,000 physician members and the laboratory community throughout the world. It is the world's largest association composed exclusively of pathologists and is widely considered the leader in laboratory quality assurance. The CAP is an advocate for high-quality and cost-effective medical care. ♦

Retired U.S. Army Reserve Nurse Appointed as Extended Care Line Executive

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center (MEDVAMC) selected Beulah Hadrick, M.S.N., R.N.-C. as the executive of its Extended Care Line. Ms. Hadrick assumed her new duties on December 26, 2004.

The MEDVAMC Extended Care Line cares for veterans who need prolonged nursing care, rehabilitation, or pressure sore care before going home, to a nursing home, or to an assisted-living environment. In fiscal year 2004, 235 veterans were admitted to the MEDVAMC Transitional Care Center, a 120-bed unit equipped for long-term care.

A nurse for 30 years and a member of the U.S. Army Reserves for 21 years, Hadrick has been the nurse executive of the MEDVAMC Extended Care Line since 2001. She previously served as a clinical manager, a care coordinator, and an associate chief nurse at the Lebanon, Pennsylvania VAMC.

Recently retired with the rank of major, Hadrick was called up for active duty during Operation Enduring Freedom and cared for wounded soldiers at Brook Army Medical Center in San Antonio. In 2004, she also volunteered her nursing skills to aid victims of Hurricane Charley. She spent two weeks at the Sarasota Special Needs Shelter providing patient care and assisting with logistical needs, such as communicating with local hospitals and relief agencies. ♦

**Michael E. DeBakey
Veterans Affairs Medical Center
2002 Holcombe Blvd.
Houston, Texas 77030
(713) 791-1414
www.houston.med.va.gov**

Edgar L. Tucker, BA, MPH, CHE, Director
Adam C. Walms, MHA, MA, Associate Director
Thomas B. Horvath, MD, FRACP, Chief of Staff
Deloris W. Leftridge, RN, MSN, CNA-BC, Chief Nurse Executive/Clinical Practice Office Director
Maurilio Garcia-Maldonado, MD, Beaumont
Outpatient Clinic Care Line Executive
Anthony Zollo, MD, Charles Wilson VA
Outpatient Clinic Care Line Executive, Lufkin
Bobbi D. Gruner, BS, MSBA, Public Affairs Officer/Editor
Frances M. Burke, Public Affairs Specialist/Writer

This publication is funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs and is an authorized publication for veterans of the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center. Contents of the newspaper are not necessarily the official views of, or endorsed by, the United States Government or the Department of Veterans Affairs. *VA Pride* is produced bi-monthly by Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center Public Affairs, Room 4A-206, mailcode 580/00PA, telephone number (713) 794-7349, e-mail address bobbi.gruner@med.va.gov, and fax number (713) 794-7038. Your comments, suggestions, ideas, and questions are always appreciated. All submissions are subject to editing and will not be returned to the sender.

Western paperback books especially appreciated . . .

Book Donations Welcomed

HOUSTON - The Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) receives a variety of donations from community members throughout the year for our inpatient and outpatient veterans, and the facility.

Popular donated items include books and magazines. Western paperback books, in particular, are in high demand and these donations are especially appreciated.

Reading materials in good condition are accepted through the MEDVAMC Voluntary Service located in Room 2A-104 on the 2nd Floor, and then forwarded to the MEDVAMC Library.

The Library welcomes donations of hardbacks and paperbacks with the understanding the publications may be added to the facility collection or distributed throughout the medical center.

Any item with mold or mildew, wet pages, insect markings or droppings, large areas of pages previously wet but now dry, spider webs, or excessive dust will not be accepted.

Please call the Voluntary Service Office at (713) 794-7135 to arrange a donation. ♦

New Renovated Rooms Make Veterans Feel More at Home When Hospitalized

HOUSTON - In an effort to create a more home-like environment for veteran inpatients, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) recently finished a major upgrade and redesign of patient rooms. The new accommodations are modern, brighter, and more comfortable. The designs are a significant step away from the typical hospital setting and focus on patient well-being, both physically and mentally.

"The new rooms have been well-received by our veterans. I have received so many positive comments from both veterans and their family members. This project has given me a great deal of personal satisfaction in creating this warm, more personal setting for those who have served our country," said Peggy Moore, MEDVAMC assistant housekeeping officer.

In the last year, 315 inpatient rooms have been upgraded with new wall coverings that are washable and easier to clean, airy drapery, new furniture including nightstands, bed tables, recliners, and visitor chairs, and bright lighting and wall art. MEDVAMC management also made sure all aspects of the room upgrades met strict infection control standards.

Continuity of care was also a concern identified and addressed by officials during the upgrade process.

"There was a significant amount of coordination between staff in patient care areas and facilities management staff to ensure availability of beds during the entire process," said Mouris Ibrahim, MEDVAMC Facilities Management Service Line Construction Section



In her newly renovated room at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center, staff kinesiotherapist Tony Hall (left) discusses home health care with WWII Army veteran and inpatient Leader Jackson. In the last year, 315 inpatient rooms have been upgraded with new wall coverings that are washable and easier to clean, airy drapery, new furniture including nightstands, bed tables, recliners, and visitor chairs, and bright lighting and wall art.

manager. "We completely upgraded seven-and-a-half rooms per week while ensuring that there would be no disruption in patient care."

To involve veterans in the upgrade process, volunteers from the MEDVAMC Transitional Care Center Resident Council made the final selections on the wall art in each patient's room.

Compliments are now frequent from patients and visitors alike on the

new accommodations.

"Our patients have expressed how pleased they are with the new home-like appearance and they especially like the paintings," said Diana Hughes, R.N., MEDVAMC nurse manager. "The room upgrades give our patients a much more comfortable environment and have notably increased patient satisfaction overall." ♦ Fran Burke, Public Affairs Specialist

New health care Web site created by the VA especially for veterans is located on the Internet at www.myhealthvet.va.gov . . .

My HealtheVet: A New Tool to Improve Your Health Care



Veteran Stephanie Wiggins (left) is shown the wide variety of health care information available on the VA's new Web site MyHealtheVet by MEDVAMC Librarian Felicia Little, M.I.S. MyHealtheVet features "one-stop shopping" for VA benefits and application forms, VA health facilities and special programs, and veterans' news.

HOUSTON - The Internet is helping veterans stay healthier longer. Veterans Day 2004 marked the one-year anniversary of a VA Web site that links veterans with the information they need

to better understand, maintain, and manage their health.

The site is called the My HealtheVet (MHV) eHealth portal. It features "one-stop shopping" for VA benefits and

application forms, VA health facilities and special programs, and veterans' news. It also provides a health education library with the latest information about medications and conditions, health measurement tools, a prescription checker, and health news updates.

This year, the portal site introduces a new section called the VA Personal Health Record. This section will let veterans keep a personal health journal of emergency health, health provider and insurance contact information, as well as their military health history, medications, over-the-counter drugs, medical events, tests, and allergies.

The site's 'Health e-log' allows a veteran to track health readings for blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol, heart rate, body temperature, pain, and body weight.

The site even allows a veteran to print out a wallet ID card automatically filled with personal information from the health journal, and with space to list allergies and medical conditions. These features are private and secure for all veterans.

By bringing VA health care to veterans' homes, MHV educates veterans about their health, while making them active partners in their health care. Sometime in the future, the site will offer veterans enrolled in VA health care the

opportunity to refill their prescriptions online, review their VA health care co-payment balance, and check on their VA clinic appointment schedule.

By the end of 2005, the eHealth portal will provide users the ability to download key portions of their VA health records so they can share this information with other health care providers.

MHV can be accessed from any computer with Internet access. In order to begin a Personal Health Record, all current users will need to re-register through the site's new secure registration procedure.

If you aren't sure about the Internet or computers in general, the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center Library offers free, introductory computer classes for veterans. During each 30-minute session, you will learn how to navigate the Internet, establish an e-mail account, search for reliable health care information, and use search engines.

Classes are by appointment only. Call (713) 794-7856 to schedule your training today. Veterans can access MHV and register for its free services by logging on to www.myhealth.va.gov. Studies show that those who play a more active role in managing their health stay healthier. Log on today. ♦ Felicia M. Little, M.I.S., MEDVAMC Librarian

“I Did It!” Eating healthy and finding the right workout helped Air Force veteran Catherine Hood lose 100 pounds and feel great.

HOUSTON - When Air Force veteran Catherine Hood stepped on the scales and read 289 pounds, she thought, “Oh my gosh, I am only 11 pounds from weighing 300.” It was then she realized she needed to take control and do something about her weight.

So, about two years ago, Catherine started coming to the Nutrition Outpatient Clinic at the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) to learn how to eat healthy and lose weight. By setting realistic goals and using self-discipline, along with encouragement from others, she started making healthier food choices and began exercising.

As a result, Catherine has lost 100 pounds and dropped 12 dress sizes as of January 10, 2005.

Catherine first met with Nancy Baker, a MEDVAMC registered dietitian. The two talked about the American Diabetes Association diet guidelines and food portion control. After their first meeting, Catherine set some initial goals and made a few changes in her diet.

“Portion control and being careful to not over do it when I did eat something that wasn’t a weight smart food were the biggest changes,” she said.

Catherine also started using sugar free products and eventually gave up

**After:
176 lb.**

**Before:
289 lb.**



Veteran Catherine Hood's proudest change since weight loss: “In the past when my daughter and I went to a restaurant, the table would come all the way up to my stomach and I had to inch my way out of the booth. Now when I sit in the booth, there is a lot of space between me and the table.” Above, Hood (left) checks in with MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern Adrienne Ferguson.

Here's How

Opportunities for Weight Loss Support and Education

✓ Managing Obesity of Veterans Everywhere (M.O.V.E.)

This program is free for all veterans, spouses, and MEDVAMC employees! It consists of a three to four class intensive, goal-oriented weight loss program that educates participants about nutrition, behavioral changes, and physical activity.

✓ Weight Management, Diabetes, Hypertension, and Hyperlipidemia Classes

These single session classes teach detailed nutrition information about specific health issues

✓ Individual Counseling

Individual counseling sessions are available in the MEDVAMC Nutrition Outpatient Clinic. These one-on-one individual nutrition education sessions concentrate on specific health issues

✓ Sign-Up and More Information

If you are interested in participating in any of these programs, contact Deborah Patterson, MEDVAMC Clinical Nutrition Section chief at (714) 791-1414, ext. 5427. Healthy eating tips and information can also be found on the Internet at the National Institute of Health's Web site, <http://health.nih.gov/result.asp/474>. Click on the links under the National Institutes of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease.

drinking regular sodas. “The first diet drink I could tolerate was diet root beer,” she said.

Her favorite healthy food became steamed broccoli. “I would sometimes splurge and put two percent cheese on it,” she said.

Physical activity was another significant change Catherine made in her lifestyle. “Being faithful to exercise was one of the biggest challenges,” she said. “My sister-in-law, a marathon runner, always tells me you have to keep your rowdy up! She always encourages me to call her to talk about my game and keep my steam going.”

The former Air Force medical laboratory technician suffered an injury to her Achilles tendon during basic training, so she began walking and jogging in a swimming pool. This type of exercise causes less strain, but still gives a wonderful aerobic workout.

Catherine encountered several obstacles and temptations along the way, including two foot surgeries this past year.

“Living with other people who aren’t eating healthy and are bringing home candy bars and chocolate ice cream has been my biggest obstacle and temptation. I overcome the temptation by telling myself that it’s not worth it, or if I do eat some, I only eat a small amount to satisfy my craving. Self-discipline is the thing I am most proud of, and probably has helped the most with weight loss,” she said.

Catherine used both self-motivation and encouragement from others to keep her weight loss goals a priority. Writing down her goals in her day planner and keeping track of her weekly weight loss

helped her stay focused.

At the beginning, she also kept a food diary to see how much she was actually eating and help control calorie intake. Also, her supporters, such as her sister-in-law and church members, would buy or give her clothes that were too small as an incentive to lose weight.

“I would hang the clothes up where I could see them daily and think about being able to wear them for motivation,” Catherine said. “Another thing that kept me motivated was putting on clothes that once fit, but now are too baggy or fall off!”

This year, Catherine has committed to exercising at least five times a week for 50 to 60 minutes each session and to continue her healthy eating plan to reach her goal weight. She realizes weight loss is a life-long commitment and is determined to continue a healthy lifestyle in order to have a healthy older adult life.

As for the rewards for success, “For New Year’s, I bought a beautiful, new black dress because my other favorite dress was too big,” Catherine said. “The preacher that used to be at my church and knew me at my heaviest weight saw me a few months ago and almost didn’t recognize me. He just couldn’t believe that I was the same person and was really impressed by my weight loss.”

Catherine’s personal tip for other people interested in losing weight is, “Always try to make the right choice! Also, walk or get some kind of movement in your life, and save calories by drinking diet soda and fat free milk. It’s painless!” ♦ *Adrienne Ferguson, MEDVAMC Dietetic Intern*

om our Veterans

Provided by the Consumer Affairs Staff
MEDVAMC Room 1B-370, (713) 794-7883

Question: Where can I get more information about Parkinson's disease and research being done to find a cure?

Answer: Contact Naomi D. Nelson, Ph.D., R.N. at the Houston Parkinson's Disease Research, Education, and Clinical Center (PADRECC) at (713) 794-7841 or naomi.nelson@med.va.gov. The PADRECC also has an informative Web site at www.va.gov/padrec.houston.

Question: I heard there are now higher limits for VA home loans. Is this true?

Answer: Recent legislation has changed the law and means veterans will be able to get no-downpayment loans of up to \$359,700. The previous ceiling was \$240,000. VA-guaranteed home loans are made by banks and mortgage companies to veterans, service members and reservists. With VA guaranteeing part of the loan, veterans can receive a good interest rate without having to make a downpayment. The new law allows VA to guarantee one-year adjustable rate mortgages (ARMs) and it extends,

through 2008, VA's "hybrid ARM program," which allows veterans to lock in a favorable interest rate for at least three years. More information about VA home loan benefits is available on the Web at www.homeloans.va.gov.

Question: How do I get more news and information about the Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center and veterans' health care?

Answer: Send an email to bobbi.gruner@med.va.gov to sign up to receive news releases and information. You can also visit www.houston.med.va.gov and click on the "In the News" symbol.

Question: Do I qualify for travel benefits to obtain VA health care?

Answer: If you meet the below criteria, you may be eligible for VA travel benefits associated with obtaining VA health care services. In most cases, travel benefits are subject to a deductible. Exceptions to the deductible requirement are: 1) travel for a compensation and pension examination; and 2) travel by an ambulance or a specially equipped van.

You qualify if you have a service-connected rating of 30 percent or more; you are traveling for treatment of a service-connected condition; you receive a VA pension; you are traveling for a scheduled compensation or pension examination; your income does not exceed the maximum annual VA pension rate; or your medical condition requires an ambulance or a specially equipped van, you are unable to defray the cost, and the travel is pre-authorized (authorization is not required for emergencies if a delay would be hazardous to life or health). For more information, contact MEDVAMC Travel Office at (713) 794-7630.

Question: Where can I find more information about eligibility?

Answer: The VA just launched a new Web site, www.va.gov/healtheligibility. Designed with the veteran in mind, the site provides easy access to VA's health benefits, eligibility, and enrollment information.

Question: Where do I get more information about CHAMPVA?

Answer: In Houston, the CHAMPVA's Woman Veterans Program Manager can be reached at (713) 794-7926. Also, for answers concerning CHAMPVA billing, call (713) 791-1414 ext. 8728.

Question: Are education classes for inpatients available?

Answer: Yes. The Brown Bag Education Program is a new health education seminar series for inpatients introduced by Yvonne S. Mack, R.N., M.S., C.H.E.S., and patient educator of the Clinical Practice Office. The program is designed to provide healthcare information to hospitalized veterans on a quarterly basis.

Upcoming classes include "Knowing About Your Medication" by Elizabeth Hopkins, Clinical Pharmacist on May 12,

2005, 11 a.m. in Room 1C Dining Room; "What Is An Advance Directive" by Celestine Woodson, Social Worker on August 11, 2005, 11 a.m. in Room 1C Dining Room; and "Eligibility Status Changes" by Brigitte Allen, Eligibility/Processing Supervisor on November 10, 2005, 11 a.m. in Room 1C Dining Room.

Question: Do I have to enroll to receive VA health care?

Answer: While most veterans must be enrolled to receive VA health care, some veterans are exempt from the enrollment requirement due to meeting special eligibility criteria. If you fall into one of the following categories, you are not required to enroll: (1) if you are seeking care for a VA-rated service-connected disability; (2) if VA has rated you with a service-connected disability of 50% or more; and (3) if less than one year has passed since you were discharged for a disability that the military determined was incurred or aggravated in the line of duty, but that VA has not yet rated.

Question: I already receive VA care, but I don't remember enrolling. How can I verify my enrollment?

Answer: If you are uncertain, call the VA Health Benefits Service Center at 1-800-222-VETS (8387).

Question: What is a VA service-connected rating and how do I establish one?

Answer: A service-connected rating is an official ruling by VA that your illness/condition is directly related to your active military service. Service-connected ratings are established by the VA Regional Office. In addition to compensation and pension ratings, this office is also responsible for many other benefits. For more information or to apply for any of these benefits, call 1-800-827-1000.

Important VA Telephone Numbers

Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center Main Line	(713) 791-1414
or toll-free	1-800-553-2278
VA Network Telecare Center	(713) 794-8985
or toll-free	1-800-639-5137
Beaumont VA Outpatient Clinic	(409) 981-8550
or toll-free	1-800-833-7734
Lufkin VA Outpatient Clinic	(936) 637-1342
or toll-free	1-800-209-3120
Pharmacy Refills	(713) 794-7648
or toll-free	1-800-454-1062
Pharmacy Helpline	(713) 794-7653
Appointment Information	(713) 794-7648
or toll-free	1-800-454-1062
VA Eligibility & Enrollment	(713) 794-7288
Patient Education Resource Center (PERC)	(713) 794-7856
VA Police	(713) 794-7106

Vet Center (Post Oak Road) (713) 682-2288
Vet Center (Westheimer) (713) 523-0884

Patient Representatives

Houston	(713) 794-7884
Beaumont	1-800-833-7734
extension	113
Lufkin	(936) 633-2753

Houston National Cemetery (281) 447-8686

VA Regional Office

Main Number	1-800-827-1000
Compensation/Pension	1-800-827-1000
Home Loans	1-888-232-2571
Education	1-888-442-4551
Insurance	1-800-669-8477
Headstones and Markers	1-800-697-6947

Low Mortality Rates

(continued from page 1)

Prompted by the need to assess comparatively the quality of surgical care in VA hospitals, the VA conducted the National VA Surgical Risk Study (NVSRS) between 1991-1993 in 44 VA medical centers. The study developed and validated models for risk adjustment of 30-day morbidity and 30-day mortality after major surgery in eight non-cardiac surgical specialties. Similar models were developed for cardiac surgery by the VA's Continuous Improvement in Cardiac Surgery Program (CICSP).

Based on the results of the NVSRS and the CICSP, the VA established the NSQIP in 1994 in all the medical centers performing major surgery. A NSQIP nurse at each center oversees collection of data and electronic transmission for analysis at one of two data coordinating centers.

Feedback to the providers and managers is aimed at achieving continuous quality improvement. It consists of (1) comparative, site-specific, and outcome-based annual reports; (2) periodic assessment of performance; (3) self-assessment tools; (4) structured site visits; and (5) dissemination of best practices. The NSQIP also provides an infrastructure for VA investigators to query the database and produce scientific presentations and publications.

"The Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center continues to stand out as a pre-eminent institution, providing

the best of care to our nation's veterans," said Peter G. Traber, M.D., president and CEO of Baylor College of Medicine. "This important recognition is well-deserved for Dr. Berger as well as his team of surgeons, nurses, and staff. Baylor takes great pride in its partnership with the DeBakey VA." For more than 50 years, MEDVAMC staff has provided clinical training for health care professionals through affiliations with Baylor College of Medicine and 85 other educational and research institutions.

In 2001, the private sector initiative was extended to 14 non-VA hospitals through a grant from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. These activities have enabled for the first time a comparison of risk-adjusted postoperative outcomes between the VA and the private sector.

"I am very proud the Michael E. DeBakey Veterans Affairs Medical Center has received such important recognition," said Thomas B. Horvath, M.D., F.R.A.C.P., MEDVAMC chief of staff. "Our surgical service staff and its practices are top-notch. I also want to mention the contributions the staff of our Anesthesiology Service has made toward the care and well being of our veterans. Their role in our Operative Care Line is critical in reducing mortality rates in our medical center. This award for continuous surgical excellence is very much earned and deserved. I am pleased we serve as such a positive example for other hospitals both inside and outside the VA health care system." ♦

